

Statement of Chairman Tom Davis
Committee on Government Reform
Hearing on “The Supersizing of America: The Federal Government's Role in
Combating Obesity and Promoting Healthy Living”
June 3, 2004

Good morning. I want to welcome everyone to today's oversight hearing on the Federal government's role in fighting obesity in the United States. Today we'll examine the increasing threat obesity poses to all Americans, what government is doing to help people lead healthier lives, and how government can provide greater health leadership for the public. As obesity will soon pass smoking as the number one avoidable cause of death among Americans, a re-examination of our national health policy is more than warranted.

The facts are, quite frankly, frightening: obesity-related diseases kill 400,000 Americans each year. Medical treatment of obesity and its more than two dozen associated conditions costs nearly \$100 billion annually, according to some estimates, with about half paid by taxpayers through Medicare and Medicaid. In 2001, obesity was a primary factor in five of the six leading causes of death among Americans: heart disease, cancer, stroke, Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease and diabetes. One-third of all Americans are considered obese; another third are overweight – and the trend line is only getting worse.

Clearly, Americans are not eating wisely and are not exercising enough. But that's too simple: the root causes of obesity are far too many in number to adequately address here today. We are a nation consumed by work, spending long hours behind desks, favoring fast-food meals and cramming in exercise when we're able, if at all.

While heredity largely determines how a person burns calories and retains fat, a person's behavior unquestionably has a great impact on weight gain. In the year 2000, women consumed 335 more calories per day than they ate in 1971. Men eat 168 more calories today than they did 30 years ago. At the same time, nearly half of all American adults report that they engage in no physical activity at all. During its meetings last week, the U.S. Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee declared that most adults need 30 minutes of moderate physical activity nearly everyday, and some require 60 minutes a day to avoid weight gain.

Yet, while there may be consensus that all Americans should be more physically active and make better eating decisions, there are numerous and conflicting views on how to reach those goals. People are confused. Should they follow the same Food Pyramid we all learned in school long ago? Is the answer a low-carb, or no-carb diet? How much daily exercise is enough to make a difference?

Today's hearing will focus on how the government should—and perhaps should not—respond to the obesity epidemic. It is especially timely because several executive branch agencies and departments are reassessing their roles in the fight against obesity.

For example, the Department of Health and Human Services and Department of Agriculture are working together on revisions to the Federal Dietary Guidelines and its well-known visual aid, the Food Pyramid. The Food and Drug Administration's Obesity Working Group released a report titled "Calories Count" to re-examine FDA's responsibilities for reducing obesity. Also, HHS is overseeing the President's "HealthierU.S." initiative to emphasize the importance of physical activity, a nutritious diet, and making smart health choices.

All of these programs are thoughtful and well-intentioned steps in the fight against obesity. But as officials at all levels of government contemplate what message to convey to an increasingly overweight U.S. population, and how to convey it, the questions we want to ask today are many and complex: what should government's role in fighting obesity be? If we agree the government should have a role in advocating healthy living, what should that role look like? To what degree should we act, and at what cost to our pocketbooks and quality of life?

Some favor significantly enhanced federal regulation of food, diet and consumer choice. Proposals ranging from the "Twinkie tax" to federally mandated labeling of restaurant menus beg a larger debate on the appropriate role of government in our lives. So the question becomes, how do we reconcile the need for government to participate in the campaign against obesity without implying that Americans shouldn't be able to make decisions about what to eat and drink on their own?

To help answer these questions, we have two panels of distinguished witnesses from the fields of government, academia, science, and law. I look forward to our discussion today, and I again want to welcome our witnesses and their important testimony.